

Resistance, Community, and Renewal

In regards to what we might face, I would say the notable difficulty would be one we already face: police repression. I hope both APOC collectives and future, larger structures will organize with security in mind.

imarisha: We always have to be careful building institutions, because people of color are already trapped in institutions that smother us. APOC is so newly birthed and we are still figuring out this new and yet very old child of ours. As we grow together, as a movement and as individual organizers, and as the organizing work we're already doing grows, we will decide what shape our work will take. I have no doubt it will take many different shapes, molded by powerful and insightful work already being done.

aguiar: Looking back, one of the best things to come out of the conference was that no organization came out of it. As I mentioned earlier, I think one of the biggest issues we face as a freedom movement is dealing with internalized issues such as self-hate, disunity, and lack of trust. Unfortunately, many political movements are not equipped to deal with these. Although a righteous sense of indignation makes us want to fight back, we're lost without a clear base of unity. Without an analysis and a willingness to fight the war on all fronts, including the war in ourselves and among our nations, our anger is ruling the work instead of our vision for the future.

Networks are coming together now, but our organization will spring forth in a way I don't think anyone has seen in many years. In unofficial ways, we already have an organization, meaning that we already have committees; local groups are forming, and so on. Our basis of unity is broad and, as the movement matures, clarifying it might be helpful.



Slush Pile Press

~2005~

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anarchist people of color...

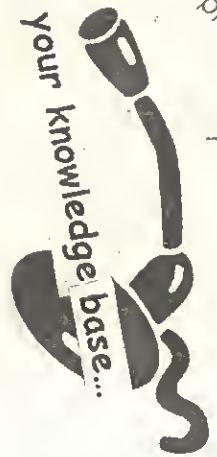


struggling together...



"Grassroots and land-based struggles characterize most of Native environmentalism. We are nations of people with distinct land areas, and our leadership and direction emerge from the land up. Our commitment and tenacity spring from our deep connection to the land."

~Winona Laduke
All Our Relations



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"I know our cause is just, that colonialism is a dead philosophy that cannot be maintained indefinitely. I am also sustained by my belief in the resilience of the Palestinian people and by the growing number of international activists, including Israelis, who refuse to give up the fight for an honorable cause."

~Ida Audeh

Live From Palestine



"We need a black (people of color!) critical theory that draws on and combines liberalisms concern with individual rights and autonomy, republican concerns with community, socialist concern with an egalitarian society and economic justice for all, feminist traditions such as resistance to suppressing intra group differences in the name of a false and oppressive unity, and blends these with recognition of the need for autonomous organization and cultural pride."

~Michael Dawson

Black Visions



ajani: The proposals were dropped because a need was seen, to first create a dialogue amongst people of color and figure out where we are, what kind of work we are doing, what we need, and why. Every group of people goes through this process in some capacity (or, if they don't they should). As one of the co-authors of the first proposals for an APOC network, I see the need for APOC based organizations/networks and think that we should collectively decide how that group is structured and what our political points of unity are. But I was not surprised that people wanted to take a more organic approach in building APOC. I didn't expect to leave with an organization that people signed on to: I expected to leave with exactly what I left with, a starting point. In the future I think we will have to address how we intend to work together. An APOC organization could only mean a strong movement of people of color who are coming together to challenge their oppressions as marginalized peoples. For people of color, our struggle is not necessarily out of choice,, but a refusal to assimilate into a system of complacency.

There are

problems in every and the key is to self-reflection, and not to ignore

"Currently, there is a strong need and desire to redefine anarchism within the context of our experiences."

gonzález: a strong need redefine the context of "What does a anarchism look question Detroit the dialogue is around the country. Although I do believe organization is needed, and will likely form at some stage, right now the emphasis is in community building and consciousness raising. There are several APOC collectives forming around the country, so something is happening organically. Communication networks are also being created.

aguir: I caught two currents here. One was the vibe that all these other people of color were there and that we were thinking on another level. That was deep, because it speaks to the sense of humanity you can feel with people you've never met and the alienation many of us have experienced when in contact with white-led movements. The other current was one of curiosity, because some folks have never met, for instance, another Asian anarchist. One of the most essential things is extending collective love and respect to the level of black attendance at the conference. One of the things we don't acknowledge is that Black people carry a very heavy load in to this. Many other groupings clash with Black folks, and there's an unspoken prejudice that permeates the room anywhere. Everyone there seemed to have the good fortune of breaking away from external tensions between ethnicities in many areas—Blacks and Latinos comes to mind—and bringing a really open spirit to the gathering. The level of trust was touching.

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~Proposals for the development of APOC organizations where dropped at the conference in favor of dialogue and more informal movement-building activities. Do you believe there is a need for APOC based organizations/networks and, if so, what form should such organizations take and what role would they play? What problems do you think such organizations might encounter?

RESISTANCE, COMMUNITY, AND RENEWAL

Institute for Anarchist Studies interview.

~The Anarchist People of Color Conference~

On October 3-5 2003, approximately 140 anarchists of color gathered in Detroit, Michigan to participate in the first ever Anarchist People of Color (APOC) Conference. We asked four conference participants to reflect on various aspects of this *unprecedented* event.

~Given the history of the Left and the anarchist movement in the US, why was the APOC gathering significant? What were some of the conference's successes and what, if any, difficulties were encountered?

ernesto aguir: Our biggest success is that we affirmed that we are not alone. We also encouraged real reflection about our identity as a group, which isn't terribly political in a conventional sense but is very important in a day-to-day way.

The conference has inspired local groups to come together and discuss how we work together and make a difference on the neighborhood level. It also prompted one-on-one discussions about what anarchism means and how we can make it accessible and understandable to everybody. I think subcultures give people the privilege of taking for granted what it means, but we need to bring our ideas and struggles to the masses of people, not to mention our grandmothers and people who don't have a personal or emotional investment in being political or even liberal. Struggling on these fronts brought us together.

One of our biggest challenges coming out of the conference is differentiating ourselves, and understanding that we are not just an anarchist faction of brown people. We need to see ourselves as part of and allied with an oppressed people's freedom movement that prioritizes organizing and social structures in bottom-up ways.

To that end, there has been a debate since the conference, on the occasion led by confused colored folks, over autonomous people of color spaces and why they are important and why our autonomy is necessary. My expectation is that people flipping for their "white allies" and fighting against autonomy will be rejected. Yet, this debate is healthy and needs to be had, because it speaks to our core values as a movement. Are we a faction of white-dominated struggle because we call ourselves anarchist or is our primary alliance with Black people, third World insurgencies, and all people of color because we are united in our struggles and are still willing to work with, and be challenged in, our politics? We are still engaged in this important discussion.

anarchist people of color

I've heard criticism that there wasn't enough of a focus on anarchist politics at the conference. I share the concern that we need to avoid workshops on things that people can hear at other events. But, for us to root up preconceptions and forge anarchist ideas that are successful, we need to pitch the old and start having a new, constructive conversation. However, a weakness of the conference and in our struggle is that we are replicating some white anarchist trends, and covering the same ground. The key is starting those new constructive conversations. We can't talk about anti-war organizing, for example, before we talk about the war within ourselves, internalized oppression, white supremacy, and self-determination, not to mention national liberation and independence.

A lot of anarchists have a tendency to think that they really do know everything, which in itself proves them wrong.

I also feel it is important to look at anarchist history and read writings by anarchists from non-Western countries. It is a racist concept that all anarchist writings come from "whites" or Western countries. Anarchism has a rich history in Japan, Korea, China, and throughout Latin America. Anarchism is still strong and vibrant in many of these countries—which is continuously ignored—and still generally seen as a Western identity, even though as an idea it has been applied to various people's struggles throughout the world.

~There was a lot of diversity among the participants in the APOC conference: people of African-American, Arab, Asian, Latino, and indigenous descent were all present. Was there a strong sense of shared identity among the conference goers or was this diversity difficult to negotiate?

imarisha: There was a strong sense of unity because we all knew we were there for a collective purpose. Most of us had never been in a space like this before, with so many other APOCs, and we were in awe. Everyone I talked to left feeling invigorated and rejuvenated after seeing the complex, multi-faceted, and determined face of APOC.

ajani: I think it is safe to say we were able to feel a shared identity through our identities as people of color. Dialoging about those cultural differences, their histories and points of unity amongst radical/anarchist people of color is a natural step and one that hasn't been overlooked. The diversity at the conference didn't seem to me something that needed to be overcome; people were excited and inspired to see each other and to have a space in which we were not made to feel tokenized or left on the margins—that in itself was tremendous and overpowering.

ajani: There is a tendency among the anarchist community to cling to the sacred texts by folks such as Bakunin, Goldman, Berkman, etc. Though their ideas and visions are important as the foundations of anarchism, they failed to address race, which was problematic during the development of anarchism at the turn of the 20th century and remains a social problem today (as do class and gender). Off the top of my head, I can name a number of authors/theorists/thinkers that people of color should read such as W.E.B. Dubois, C.L.R. James, Reies López Tijerina, Gloria Anzaldúa, Assata Shakur, and Malcolm X. These authors are relevant because they not only address the way race functions but also look beyond traditional ways of thinking. I would also recommend looking at past resistance movements, especially within the American context, like the Abolitionists, Civil Rights movement groups such as Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panthers, the Brown Berets, the feminist struggle, farm workers, struggles in the southwest (César Chávez, etc.) and the resistance of black workers in Detroit's auto factories as spelled out in Dan Georgakas' book *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying* (Boston, MA: South End, 1998). I would also recommend Rodolfo Acuña's *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (Boston, MA: Pearson Longman, 2003) and works by J. Sakai and Noel Ignatiev.

"Woman does not feel safe when her own culture and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey." ~ **Gloria Anzaldúa**

gonzález: I think it's important to read current writings. Anarchists have a tendency to get stuck in turn of the century authors and their views. Some current writers I would recommend include Arundati Roy, Ward Churchill, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Audrey Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, among many others. It's important to understand where people are coming from, to understand their struggles, and to understand what being an ally means.

heather ajani: The APOC gathering was significant because the history of the left and the anarchist movement is so dominated by white people. I can't recall a time when anarchists of color have come together in a separate space as we did in Detroit last October. The fact that this conference happened at all, and that so many people came, is a huge success. What is most important is that the APOC conference created a space that hadn't been physically carved out within the current radical milieu: folks were able to come together and dialogue about their experiences as people of color and talk about how to gain empowerment and strength, not only among other activists but also as radicals in their own communities. Any difficulties that occurred were prior to the conference and had to do with our organizing efforts. That kind of stuff happens and it didn't overshadow the conference because people didn't let it. People realize that our movement is what we make it, that the conference wasn't centered around any one person, that it didn't represent a "changing of the guard" from older politicians to newer members of the radical people of color community. It was about people working together, learning from each other, listening, and taking the experience away with themselves. Even when there was a glitch with a workshop or a debate, folks were able to step back and immediately reflect on why things happened the way they did. I have never seen such an open dialogue and immediate, on-site resolution of issues.

walidah imarisha: The history of the left and the anarchist movement in the US has been one heavily dominated by white standards and ways of organizing. People of color have to work within an overwhelmingly white movement that often acted with indifference or outright racism to their issues. The APOC gathering was momentous in that it help to place APOC in a political context here in the US, helped us to see that we were not alone, and that there are many, many anti-authoritarian or anarchist folks of color.

It also helped us connect to our own history of anarchism. As various peoples of color, most of us have a culture of anti-authoritarianism, whether it was called communalism, tribalism, primitivism, or whatever other name given to it by European colonizers. Anarchism, to me, is a fancy name for what cultures of color have been practicing for millennia. The APOC conference gave us a foundation to realize this and to work toward rebuilding what has been stolen from us.

angel gonzalez: Everyone I knew who participated in the conference was aware that something big was happening. What we are seeing is the emergence of a new movement, even a new identity. To myself, and many others, the conference was about building community and reconnecting with our identities in different ways.

As far as difficulties, there were rumors of a potential attack by white supremacists and internal disputes among organizers, but these were overshadowed by the overwhelmingly positive conference. There were, however, minor issues with fundraising for transportation. We had a lot of support but unfortunately we received the money too late for it to be of any use!

~Clearly, anarchists need to continuously innovate and learn from thinkers outside of the anarchist tradition if anarchism is going to be relevant to the world. Can you identify some non-anarchist thinkers that are or could be especially relevant to anarchists of color? If so, why are they relevant?



aguilar: I mentioned various authors worth reading in an interview I did with *The Female Species* zine some time back and a lot of people took offense at the fact that I named figures like Che Guevara, for example. I'm glad you are asking that question, because I think this relates to another healthy debate that speaks to our core values.

It is not enough for anarchists to speak up against the state, uphold the necessity of anti-authoritarianism, and revolt. If previous rebellions have shown us anything, it's that our idealism and taking to the streets can only take this so far. We may feel righteous about our action, but we leave no legacy and the powers never change. In my opinion, we need to be more conscious of the world around us and its history. Knowledge of the past is essential for understanding the present and grasping what forces are at work: it gives us hints about future developments. We need to start examining what non- and even anti-anarchist thinkers of color have to say. Anyone who is open to learning should be willing to look beyond the tradition and see where we can grow.

There are some pretty obvious anti-colonial movements that should be required study material, if only because they did something that inspired so many by standing up to settlers and showing them the door. That's a beautiful thing, no matter how you slice it. I always recommend J. Sakai's *Settlers* (Chicago: Morningstar Press, 1989) and Reies López Tijerina's autobiography, *They Called Me 'King Tiger'* (Houston, TX: Arte Publico press, 2001). In addition, a compañera recently shared with me some powerful writings by academics (a category of writers I normally dismiss): Jared Sexton, Steve Martinot, and Tomas Almaguer have all written some fantastic works.

"Many people in this country who want to see us the minority and who don't want us taking too militant or too uncompromising a stand are absolutely against the successful regrouping or organizing of any faction in this country whose thought and whose thinking pattern is international rather than national." ~ Malcolm X